

Farming is still her life at age 82

By Tony Chamberlain
Globe Staff

"Come on, Mom," John Veiga said. "You've got to quit early tonight. We've got the wake."

Fortunata Veiga, 82 years old, sat in a beach chair alongside Rte. 53 in Duxbury. In front of her on the small sandy shoulder of the road were six bushel baskets. The two bushels that had contained corn were empty, but some green beans, squash, onions and crab apples still lay in the others.

John Veiga, 53, helped his mother out of the chair and into his van, then loaded the bushel baskets. He said he doesn't know how his mother is able to do the hours of farming and selling all day in the relentless heat.

"The doctor," he explained, "says she shouldn't work so much. He says she should work only three hours a day, but still she works seven, eight, nine hours every day — every day of the week."

Fortunata Veiga doesn't look 82. Her face conceals her age. And John, for that matter, doesn't look much older than 40. But, for the past 32 years Fortunata Veiga

has been up at 5 each morning to do the picking, weeding and watering for the day. Then she has brought the vegetables up to this spot on Rte. 53 and sat there in the shade of a pine tree to sell what she has grown.

Until 10 years ago the little truck farm had been a family operation to supplement income. But since her husband, John, died in 1970, Fortunata has carried it on alone because, she says, "I don't like to owe people money. If I can't pay my taxes, I'll lose my land."

On a good day, if she can sell all the corn she picks, Fortunata can clear \$24. That's on a good day. An average day for the three months or so she sells is more like \$12 or \$15, which she banks to supplement her \$225-a-month Social Security payment.

"My taxes," she said in broken English, "they're a thousand dollars a year, and now my oil is almost 200 a month. That's why I got to do this every day. If I don't do this every day, I'll owe money, and then I can't sleep."

She'll never know whether she's eligible for welfare assistance. When it is suggested

she look into it, she motions angrily with her hand, saying only, "No. No welfare."

Among other things, she would never want to complete the state forms, which require detailed financial statements. It was bad enough to make out forms, at the urging of her son, seeking the property tax deductions for senior citizens. "They asked me all these things," she said, "and I told them, 'I don't tell you those things. You're not my priest.'"

But behind her refusal to seek welfare is the pride and tenacious independence that has marked her family's life in America since John Veiga emigrated from the Cape Verde Islands in 1909. He worked as a long-shoreman in Boston, saving enough money to eventually buy a small variety store and boarding house on the corner of Middlesex street and Lucas alley. Like many men who immigrated, John spent a few years making a stake in the United States, then sent for his family. And even as they were settling in Boston and raising children, the Veigas also were buying land, bit by bit, in the fertile area of West Duxbury, where

they dreamed one day of having their own farm.

It has been more than 30 years now since that dream came true, when Fortunata Veiga first brought her produce up to the side of Rte. 53 while her husband trucked the bulk of what they raised to the Boston market. And of that original eight acres, there are more than two acres left, along with the house John built in those first years.

Without consulting anyone, not even her son, Fortunata sold a three-acre parcel a few years ago to a developer for \$5000, a fraction of what it was worth. Five thousand dollars seemed a lot to her, and she had not checked real estate values. She is not sure how it all happened, but in the end her lawyer told her she would get only a little more than \$2000 after closing costs and legal fees.

"My mother," John said, "was one of those people who is so honest, she thinks everyone else will be honest, too. She was not used to the kinds of people who steal from you and use you."

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WORKING — TO KEEP HER LAND

PEOPLE — VEIGA



Surrounded by vegetables she herself picked on her West Duxbury farm, 82-year-old Fortunata Veiga waits by the side of Rte. 53 for a customer. GLOBE PHOTO BY DAVID RYAN

At 82, she farms to pay the taxes

★ VEIGA

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Rte. 53 once was a country road that wound the inland route to Cape Cod, and the Velgas' business was mainly for travelers going or coming from vacation. In those days, everyone in town knew this area as Fernandes Corner, named after another one of the many large Cape Verdean families who settled in the area to work in construction, farming and the cranberry bogs.

No longer a little country road, Rte. 53 now teems along past Fortunata's little card table stand, displaying all the blessings of a growing suburb — the trucks, family station wagons and teenagers' jolopies on parade at 50 mph. No one remembers Fernandes Corner, and the growth is all a little confusing and frightening to Fortunata Veiga.

But she believes whatever forces that could wrest her land away from her will be held at bay as long as she gets up every morning to do the picking, and gets to her stand and sells at least \$15 worth of corn.

Whatever produce she has left, she will freeze and eat through the winter, including the strawberries she will begin picking after this selling season ends Sept. 9. The only reason for that date, Fortunata said, incidentally, is that it will be her 83d birthday.

"She does her farming with a cane now," said

John, shaking his head. "She shouldn't work so hard. I try to tell her she shouldn't, but she doesn't listen."

But for Fortunata Veiga, there is no other way.

"My husband said when he built the house, 'I'm going to die before you. Stay in the house and it will take care of you.' So I need to work for the profit or I'll lose the land," she said. "And I am going to stay here until God takes me."